

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **A-10**

WASHINGTON POST
10 August 1985

Pacifists Reach Nicaraguan Town

Identity of Group That Stopped Them on River Is Disputed

By Filadelfo Aleman
Associated Press

SAN CARLOS, Nicaragua, Aug. 9—The 29 American peace activists who said they were held captive by rebels for a day arrived in this town on Lake Nicaragua today.

Questions about the incident continued, with members of the Washington-based Witness for Peace group and others offering contradictory statements about what had happened and who had stopped their boat on the San Juan River that forms the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

The Americans arrived at San Carlos, a port town at the mouth of the river, 125 miles south of Managua, by boat at about 1:30 p.m. (3:30 p.m. EDT) and were greeted by the townspeople. All of the Americans appeared to be in good condition.

Fourteen journalists traveling with the group—11 reporters and three photographers—had arrived earlier.

The organization had said there were 18 journalists with the group when anti-Sandinista rebels reportedly fired automatic weapons over the boat Wednesday and forced the group to disembark on the Costa Rican side.

The peace group and the leftist Sandinista government in Managua accused the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance, known by its Spanish acronym Arde, of kidnaping the activists, who wanted to hold a peace vigil at the site of a recent battle between the U.S.-backed guerrillas and Nicaraguan soldiers.

Representatives of the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance categorically denied that it had kidnaped anybody, and said other anticommunist guerrillas operate along the river near El Castillo de la Concepcion where the incident occurred. It also noted that the group disappeared in an area that government troops had retaken from the guerrillas.

A free-lance photographer on the trip, Bolivar Arellano of New York, said, "It is not true, as was reported, that they shot at the boat and fired many bursts into the air. The truth is that they fired two or three times in the air to warn us to stop."

Arellano, said that when the gunmen took the activists off the boat "they told us they were from [Eden] Pastora's Arde group." He said the

"They fired two or three times in the air to warn us to stop."

— Bolivar Arellano

next day a guerrilla commander said the rebels did not belong to Arde and were "independent Nicaraguan anticommunists in exile."

Former Sandinista commander Eden Pastora headed the military arm of Arde until the group made common cause with a larger guerrilla group based in Honduras. Pastora's group apparently still uses the name Arde, or Arde Sur.

NBC News reporter Peter Kent, who was with the group, said the guerrillas fired only one shot to stop the boat. He said the rebels' leader, who identified himself as Comandante William, "didn't know who the Americans were. He said his men simply stop all boats on the river."

Kent said the activists were allowed to return to the boat after several hours. The next day, Kent said, "yet another guerrilla arrived and contradicted his men's claim that they were members of the Pastora faction. The parting protesters and the accompanying journalists were not convinced by the disclaimer."

Last night, Witness for Peace spokeswoman Sharon Hostetler modified her earlier statements accusing Arde and said the kidnapers

had told the activists they were "independent anticommunist" rebels.

Today, Witness for Peace spokesman Dennis Marker said in Washington that the kidnapers were members of the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance, but the activists on the boat had been ordered to say otherwise. The activists on the boat communicated with their office in Managua by radio.

"The people on the boat believe it is Arde," Marker said. "We were told they [the activists] were waiting to be released when an Arde commander came. This person came, apparently, and we were told to say on the [boat's] radio that the rebels were not Arde." He added that the activists then made a "specific transmission ordered by the contras."

Witness for Peace opposes the Reagan administration's policy of trying to destabilize the Sandinista government because of its ties with Cuba and the Soviet Union. The activist group has sent about 1,500 people to hold peace vigils in Nicaragua during the last two years.

The CIA supplied the two largest anti-Sandinista rebel groups with money and weapons until last spring when a congressional aid cutoff took effect. But this year Congress reached a compromise with the administration, and Reagan signed a foreign aid bill yesterday that provided for resumption of nonlethal U.S. aid to the contras.

Activist Ed Griffin-Nolan, of Albuquerque, N.M., said the group might stay the weekend in San Carlos and return to Managua Monday.

One of the activists, Shubert Frye, 80, of Port Jervis, N.Y., was reportedly ill. The government sent a helicopter to San Carlos to take him to Managua at the group's request. Warren Armstrong of Wayne, Pa., who acted as spokesman, said that "it was not an emergency," but he did not elaborate.

The group included Bob Heifetz, 53, of San Francisco, Calif., son of violinist Jascha Heifetz.